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ABSTRACT

The New Jersey Community College Counselors Association expressed a need to identify the demographic characteristics and professional responsibilities of community college counselors in the state. Community college counselors (N=102) completed questionnaires examining such issues as length of employment, tenure, professional preparation, salary, professional responsibilities, and perception of counseling services. Respondents were also given the opportunity to comment on pertinent issues about counseling services on their campuses. Major comments concerned the perceived low status of counseling. The survey revealed that, overall, the state's community college counselors were an experienced, professional group with a median 7 years of service in their current position and with a median 11 years of service at their college. Ninety percent of the counselors in tenure-track positions reported having achieved tenure. Only seven percent of the respondents had less than a master's degree. A majority of counselor time was spent doing advisement and administrative work. Counselors reported wanting more time to provide quality personal counseling to students. A reaction from the president of the New Jersey Community College Counselors Association is included. (NB)

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THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE COUNSELOR:

A PROFILE OF QUALIFICATIONS, RESPONSIBILITIES,

AND SELF-PERCEPTION

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October, 1986

In October 1985 the Executive Committee of the New Jersey Community College Counselors Association discussed the need to determine the demographic characteristics as well as professional responsibilities of community college counselors in the state. Based on this discussion, a questionnaire was designed and subsequently mailed to community college counselors. The preliminary results of this survey were presented to the Fifth Annual Conference of the N.J. 3 C's (December, 1985). The purpose of this report is to present in more detail the results of the 1985 survey.

THE SAMPLE

All counselors on N.J. 3 C's master list of counselors in the state were mailed the questionnaire. The master list of counselors is compiled from staff lists provided by the directors of counseling at each of the nineteen community colleges. Out of 208 questionnaires sent out, 102 useable questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 49 percent. It should be noted that 23 respondents indicated that their job title was something other than a "counselor". The questionnaires of these respondents were examined as a separate subsample of the total group. However, the response distribution of this subsample was so close to that of the total respondents (less the subsample) that it was decided to report the results for all respondents together regardless of job title.

Table 1 contains a distribution of the number of respondents by college. As the number responding to this item, as well

as most of the other items in the questionnaire, was close to 100 (N=102) the percent distribution was not calculated.

TABLE 1

Number of Respondents by College

College	No. Respondents	College	No. Respondents
Atlantic	4	Mercer	6
Bergen	11	Middlesex	6
Brookdale	10	Morris	5
Burlington	5	Ocean	3
Camden	4	Passaic	6
Cumberland	3	Salem	2
Essex	8	Somerset	5
Gloucester	5	Union	10
Judson	8	Warren	1
		Other*	1
		TOTAL	102

*did not identify college

Eighteen of the nineteen community colleges were represented in the sample. Bergen and Brookdale had the highest number of respondents; Ocean, Salem and Warren had the lowest. Of the respondents, 71 percent were members of the N.J.3C's.

LENGTH OF EMPLOYMENT

Ninety-eight (98) percent reported they were employed full-time. Seventy-one (71) percent indicated their position was primarily counseling and 22 percent indicated their position was primarily administrative. As mentioned above, the responses of these two groups did not vary significantly. Thirty-five (35) percent of the respondents reported that they had worked full-time 1 to 4 years in their present occupation, 27 percent had

worked 5 to 10 years, 26 percent had worked 11 to 15 years and 9 percent had worked over 16 years in their present occupation. This may be compared to the number of years the respondents worked full time at their college. The respondents' distribution was as follows: 25 percent had worked 1 to 4 years, 22 percent had worked 5 to 10 years, 34 percent had worked 11 to 15 years and 13 percent had worked at their college over 16 years. The median years worked in their present occupation was approximately 7, with the median years worked full time at their college being approximately 11. It could be hypothesized that some of the present counselors had other jobs at their college before becoming a counselor.

TENURE

Forty-four (44) percent of the respondents indicated that they were tenured faculty. A slightly higher percent indicated that they had a possibility of becoming tenured (52%). Since all of those who have tenure would also indicate that they had the possibility of becoming tenured, one could postulate that approximately 8 percent (52-44) of those who could possibly become tenured are not yet tenured. It should be noted that 57 percent reported that they had faculty rank. When this is compared with the 52 percent who indicated they had a possibility of becoming tenured, it would appear that 5 percent of the respondents could have faculty rank but not be on a tenured track.

PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION

A majority of the respondents (75%) indicated they had a master's degree, 5 percent earned a specialist degree and 14

percent an earned doctorate. Approximately 90 percent of these degrees were in counseling, counseling psychology, psychology or student personnel development. Seven (7) percent of the respondent's reported the bachelor's degree as the highest degree earned. Sixteen (16) percent indicated they were pursuing an advanced degree and another 14 percent indicated that they would like to pursue an advanced degree. A large majority (98%) reported that their college encouraged continued educational development through tuition reimbursement. When asked, "If a counseling position were to become available today on your campus what do you think the minimum educational qualifications would be?", 6 percent indicated a bachelor's degree, 87 percent indicated a master's degree and 3 percent indicated specialist degree. None of the respondents indicated thaty they thought a doctorate would be required as a minimum educational qualification.

SALARY

Table 2 contains a distribution of the respondents'income. Please note that the percent distribution is also presented as the sample size was 88.

TABLE 2

Respondents Distribution of Current Annual Salary

Salary	No.	Percent (total N=88)
Below $15,000	0	0
$15,001-$20,000	15	17
$20,001-$25,000	23	26
$25,001-$30,000	16	18
$30,001-$35,000	11	13
$35,001-$40,000	14	16
$40,001-$45,000	8	9
$45,001 and over	1	<1

The data in Table 2 indicates that the current annual salary for counselors ranges from approximately $15,000 to approximately $45,000. The median salary falls in the $25,001 to $30,000 range. Thirteen (13) percent of the respondents did not respond to this question.

PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

One of the major purposes of this questionnaire was to determine the percentage of time the counselors spent performing various activities. It should be noted here that 69 percent of the respondents indicated that they worked in a centralized counseling environment and 31 percent in a decentralized environment. Among the colleges where counseling is decentralized are Brookdale, Hudson, Ocean, Essex,and Passaic. The type and degree of decentralization varies from college to college.

Table 3 contains the percent distribution of the activities in which counselors indicated they were involved during an academic semester.

TABLE 3

Distribution of Time Spent Doing Various Counseling Activities

Activity in Rank Order	Percent of Time Spent
Individual Academic Advisement	25.1
Administrative Work	15.7
Career Counseling	15.2
Personal Concerns Counseling	12.6
Transfer Counseling	7.5
Committee Work	6.5
Financial Aid Counseling	3.9
Testing	3.9
Group Advising	3.7
Teaching	3.0
Research	2.2

The data in Table 3 indicates that 40 percent of counselor time is spent doing individual academic advisement and administrative work. One quarter of the counselor time is spent doing career counseling and personal counseling. The least amount of time is spent teaching (freshmen orientation and/or psychology courses) and doing research.

PERCEPTION OF COUNSELING SERVICES

Another major purpose of the questionnaire was to determine how various constituents would evaluate the counseling services on the various campuses. The respondents were asked to indicate on a seven point scale (1=low to 7=high) how they thought their services would be evaluated by students, faculty,and administration. The mean responses were as follows: for students 5.2, for faculty 4.8,and for administration 4.6. It is evident that the counselors who responded believed the students would evaluate their services more highly than faculty or administrators. The mean for each of the three groups was slightly above average.

RESPONDENT COMMENTS

The respondents were given the opportunity to bring to the attention of NJ3C any pertinent issues about counseling services on their campus. Twenty-four (24) percent of the respondents chose to so respond.

The major comments concerned the perceived "low status" of counseling. It was mentioned by a few of the respondents that counseling was neither thoroughly understood nor appreciated. Another mentioned that the job counselors do is not valued very

highly. A correlate to this is the view that the role and function of counselors is not understood. Also, there appeared to be a lack of administrative support varying from providing the basics (secretarial support) to a lack of encouragement of professional growth. Many of the respondents expressed the fact that they had extemely high caseloads (in one case 1,500 to one!).

Other respondents mentioned that their college had begun to hire "counselor specialists"with a Bachelor's degree who were assigned counseling responsibilities. This potential reduction of basic academic requirements for entering the counseling profession was viewed by some of the respondents as being very dangerous.

Some counselors pointed out the need for more bilingual and minority counselors. Several respondents mentioned that they did not have the type of office which would permit confidential discussions to take place. A few called for more time for individual counseling and less administrative work. One counselor mentioned the need for all counselors to be certified by NBCC (National Board for Certified Counselors).

IMPLICATIONS

The NJ3C survey was designed to provide information about the collective identity of the counselors in New Jersey's nineteen community colleges. In most respects, the survey results speak for themselves. However, as with all survey instruments, interpretations must be made carefully. Nearly one half of the population (N.J. Community College Counselors) responded to the survey but no assumptions should be made concerning the survey

respondents as compared to non-respondents.

The survey revealed that, overall, the state's community college counselors are an experienced, professional group with a median seven years of service in their current position and with a median eleven years of service at their college. Nine out of ten of those counselors in tenure-track positions have actually achieved tenure. It is curious to note that some of the respondents indicated that they had faculty rank but did not have the possibility of becoming tenured. Future research efforts might probe the relative merits of faculty rank and tenure and compare these observations with campuses where counselors are not classified as faculty. Also, it may be important to further investigate the relationship between having faculty rank and being tenure tracked.

Only seven percent of the respondents have less than a master's degree. This seems to validate the belief that, in actual practice, the minimum educational requirement to serve as a community college counselor is the master's degree. However, concern was raised that, at some campuses, persons with less than a master's degree were being hired in counseling positions. Though the extent of this practice cannot be assessed by this survey, respondents who reported this issue clearly viewed this lessening of educational standards as detrimental.

Counselor salaries were reported on the survey instrument in intervals of $5,000 which tends to make descriptive statistics somewhat imprecise. Forty-three (43) percent of the respondents are making $25,000 or less annually. The latest edition of the

Occupational Outlook Handbook (1986-87), published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the U.S. Department of Labor, lists the national average salary for school counselors in 1984-85 at $27,543. Future research efforts on this topic should make comparisons of actual salaries with the most recent statistics available and make efforts to determine which salaries reported are earned on a less-than-twelve month working calendar.

Regarding the percentage of time allocated to various counseling activities, the survey results seem to concur with other studies which have examined counseling practice at the two-year college (N.J. State Department of Education, 1980; Warnath, 1973). As indicated in the national research on retention, there is a strong need for personal and career counseling on our campuses (Noel, 1985). Despite this need, only 26 percent of the respondents' time was spent on these vital activities. More specifically, a majority of counselor time is spent doing advisement and administrative work. Very little time is spent teaching or doing research (only 5 percent of counselor time is spent on these activities). Follow up studies should attempt to assess the degree of counselor satisfaction with this distribution of time. Furthermore, an investigation may be warranted to determine why so little time is spent teaching and conducting research.

As identified in numerous studies nationwide and in the respondents comments in the present study, many counselors believe that their jobs are not highly appreciated, valued, or understood (Workman, Thomas, Garstka, Hudson, 1986; Warnath, 1973).

Counselors perceived that their services would be evaluated as average or slightly above average by students, faculty and administrators. The accuracy and implications of this perception need to be fully explored. Discussions of this issue should take place on individual campuses as well as being a general topic of concern for NJ3C. In addition, this finding establishes the need for counselors to more clearly define their contributions to the college community and to expand the communication ties with various college constituencies.

SUMMARY

In summary, the "typical" counselor working in a New Jersey community college would have the following profile. This counselor possess at least a Master's degree in counseling or a directly related field. He or she is as likely as not to have faculty rank and is tenured. The individual has been employed as a professional counselor for approximately seven years but has been working at the same college for about eleven years. The counselor's salary would be in the $25,000 to $30,000 range. She or he would be working full-time in a centralized counseling center. The theoretical counselor would spend approximately 55 percent of the time doing individual academic advisement, administrative work or career counseling. Approximately one out of ten of the students seen would be seen for personal concerns counseling. The counselor is not likely to be teaching or involved in research. He or she, in general, would believe that students, other faculty and administrators would evaluate their services as slightly above average, believing students would evaluate their

services higher than faculty and faculty higher than administration. The counselor is likely to be concerned that his or her professional services are not fully supported nor appreciated. Finally, the typical counselor would like to have more time to provide quality personal counseling to the students.

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REACTION FROM THE PRESIDENT OF THE

NEW JERSEY COMMUNITY COLLEGE COUNSELORS ASSOCIATION

In 1981, the New Jersey Community College Career Counselors Association discarded one of its' C's to become the New Jersey Community College Counselors Association. This titular change was made to reflect a deeper shift in organizational philosophy. We recognized that the scope and focus of counselor responsibilities around our state had been changing. Sometimes these changes were occurring under counselor direction,sometimes not. Tight budgets had made all portions of our collegiate communities pay sharp attention to role, function, accountability, and vitality for the future. It was determined that N.J.3 C's would be an organization to assist counselors with the process of promoting professional growth and identity in times that demand strength and clarity in each of these areas. We have endeavored to meet this goal through our conferences, regional meetings, and formal and informal networking. This research effort represents another significant step toward that goal. It is with great pride that we present this initial effort to you.

In reviewing the survey and considering the implications of its' findings, questions regarding professional identity kept recurring. We have in our nineteen community colleges "paraprofessional counselors", "advisors", "academic counselors", "counselors", etc. In light of this,it is not surprising that confusion can exist regarding counselor role, function, and qualifications. Consequently, it seemed appropriate to commence comments on the survey with a definition of who the community college counselor is.

A community college counselor is a person who possesses expertise in certain areas of human behavior; understands the unique nature of the community college experience; and is proficient in certain skill areas, e.g. communication skills, problem-solving skills, decision making skills, etc. This body of knowledge is refined and/or acquired in graduate level training programs in counseling or directly related fields. In addition to mastering the aforementioned content and skill areas, community college counselors abide by a code of ethics developed by the American Association for Counseling and Development.

It is very heartening to review the data in this survey and see the strong professional qualifications of New Jersey's Community College counselors. The vast majority of community college counselors in the state are seasoned professionals. They possess at least a Master's degree in counseling or a related field. They have seven years of experience as professional counselors at their current institutions by whom they have been employed for a total of eleven years. This certainly represents a significant strength

of a relatively new component of the system of higher education in the state. (The oldest community college in New Jersey just celebrated it's twentieth birthday). This makes a considerable amount of expertise in life management skills available to the students, faculty, and administrators of the state's community colleges.

There is some evidence in this study of a trend which has the capacity to erode this demonstrable stength within our state system. Several comments indicated that some colleges are hiring less than qualified people for counselor positions. This drop in standards is even more remarkable when there is such a strong national movement toward the certification and licensure of counselors. Caring individuals with Bachelor's degrees can certainly function well as advisors. Advisors assist students with structured, information-giving activities such as course selection, career information, etc. Advisors are not counselors. Counselors are not advisors. As stated above, a counselor is an individual who has completed graduate level training in life management skills. A counselor is a trained professional who assists students with the acquisition of the skills and information needed to better accomplish personal, career and academic goals. Counselors also assist students with the resolution of life crises. The training needed to perform these functions is not acquired at the bachelor's level.

Counselors must assume responsibility for this potential erosion of professional standards and the blurring or misunderstanding of role and function that it implies. By "assume responsibility", two meanings are intended. First, we are partially responsible for this unfortunate state of affairs. As a profession, we have traditionally been quite passive in defining ourselves and informing others of this definition. This passivity has served no one. This lack of clarity regarding the significance of our counseling skills and responsibilities has contributed to an unfortunate reality. This reality is that when budgets are tight, counseling services are frequently the first areas cut within a college.

The community college student represents the full spectrum of human needs, motivation, goals, etc. The mandate of the community college is such that strong counseling services are a sine qua non. As counselors, we have a unique opportunity to not only become involved in the growth of our students but also to serve as social change agents. When we remain passive, all of these exciting opportunities are lost to us and to all the members of our college community.

The second meaning of "assume responsibility" is simply that if counselors do not assume responsibility for changing this situation, no one else will. If we do not define the value of our professional contribution and articulate it to our constituents, no one will do it for us. Actually, others will do it for us and

their definition will invariably be in conflict with our professional standards. So, the task is ours to communicate knowledge of our professional expertise and our daily contribution to the quality of education on our campuses. Concerns raised by counselors such as the need for physical facilities which allow for confidential discussions cannot be ignored. Counselors need to use their assertiveness skills to further the goals of the profession. These activities can be viewed in two arenas. First, what can be done on a state-wide basis to improve the perception of the contribution and skills of community college counselors? At this level, involvement in professional organizations becomes crucial. As a group, our voice is stronger and clearer than when we attempt to speak alone. Active support of professional associations is the key means of creating attitudinal change at the state level.

Second, what can be done on each of our campuses to promote greater understanding of counseling? This process could begin with a definition of counseling services that is agreed upon by the counseling staff. The definition should be consistent with the campus definition of students services and the philosophy of your college. Next, based on this definition, and data regarding student need, annual goals and objectives which reflect this definition, data and philosophy are established individually; as a staff; as a division; and so on. This process can be formal or informal. The objectives are the specific activities in which the counselor engages to promote maximal student growth.

Once the definition, philosophy, goals, and objectives have been identified, this information should be broadcast to every corner of the campus through every channel of communication. Clear, simple, consistent messages regarding counseling services and its' programs should be imparted at individual staff meetings, faculty meetings, meetings of student clubs, etc. Written releases can consistently be included in a faculty newsletter, campus or community newspapers, counseling services newsletter, etc. The channels are there. The challenge is figuring out how to use them consistently and effectively.

The New Jersey Community College Counselors Association is committed to assisting counselors to meet these challenges. This organization has always worked to clarify and promote professional standards of practice throughout the state. N.J. 3 C's is also committed to researching and disseminating information on the changing pictures of community college counseling in our state. Organizational efforts have also been directed toward facilitating contact between counselors in order to lessen the isolation in which we work. The revitalization and sharing of ideas which occurs as a part of these processes is crucial to creatively and energetically meeting the professional challenges which are before us.

We welcome your participation in these endeavors.

NEW JERSEY COMMUNITY COLLEGE COUNSELORS ASSOCIATION

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